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ABSTRACT

Older women (N=50) were asked a series of questions about reference groups, sex roles, sexuality, sexual desire at different stages in the life cycle, appropriateness of certain types of sexual behavior, adjustment to aging, life satisfaction, organizational activities, and male/female interaction. Quantitative and qualitative data provided the basis for several findings: (1) social relationships in old age involve extensive contact with other women; (2) age and social class determine the integration of sexuality into life; (3) conformance to traditional attitudes is limiting; (4) the values of one's closest peer-reference group have a strong impact on one's sexual attitudes and behavior; (5) organizational activities do not necessarily ensure contact with men; (6) a low level of sexual desire does not appear to affect life satisfaction negatively; and (7) changing attitudes toward men determine sexual interaction. Findings suggest that these women experience a relinquishment of social relationships and roles typical of adulthood, i.e., wife, homemaker, sexual partner, mother, as well as an acceptance of new roles and relationships typical of later years, typified by minimal contact with men, extensive contact with women, and a decreased importance of sexuality. (Author/NRB)

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Determinants of Aged Female Sexuality

by

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In 1979, a sample of fifty women from a major southwestern city were randomly selected from a target population of older women who belong to groups whose membership consists predominantly of people over 65 years of age. The mean age of respondents was 73 years. Personal, private interviews lasting from one to two hours were individually conducted over a three month time period with each of the fifty women selected. The interview included both closed and open-ended questions. Respondents were primarily white, middle-class women with Protestant backgrounds. Two out of three were without partners.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about reference groups, sex-roles, sexuality, sexual desire at different stages in the life cycle, appropriateness of certain types of sexual behavior, adjustment to aging, life satisfaction, organizational activities and male/female interaction. Both quantitative and qualitative data provide the basis for the following findings.

Findings

It should be emphasized that these findings pertain to the sample which was studied. Findings show that:

1). social relationships in old age involve extensive contact with other women.

2). age and social class determine how women integrate the concept of sexuality into their lives.

3). conformance to traditional attitudes serves to limit sexual possibilities and alternatives.

4). the values of the closest peer-reference group with which the respondent has contact has a strong impact on the direction of sexual attitudes and behavior of the respondent.

5). club or organization membership/activity and number of friends and chances to meet people are not major determinants of whether the respondent will have contact with a sufficient number of men who may then be considered potential mates.

6). a low level of sexual desire does not appear to negatively affect life satisfaction and changing attitudes toward men determine the nature and level of sexual interaction.

Conclusions

It appears from this study that there is a relinquishment of social relationships and roles typical of adulthood and an acceptance of social relationships and roles typical of the later years. In the case of most older women, the primary roles of wife, companion, homemaker, sexual partner and mother are relinquished to a large extent in old age. Acceptance of new social relationships and roles typical of the later years involves adjusting to minimal contact with

men and extensive contact with women. It also includes a decreased importance of sexuality in general. The degree to which respondents relinquish old roles and relationships and accept new ones is probably a determining factor in the degree of happiness and life satisfaction reported.

Within this sample, age and social class are major determinants of how respondents integrate the concept of sexuality into their lives. Younger, better educated women with higher incomes feel less constricted by social norms and age and gender-linked behavior. They are generally more open about sexuality and if interested, will actively seek a marriage or sexual partner. Older women of lower social standing deviate less attitudinally and behaviorally from social norms, as they perceive them, than other women. Tradition, religion, and peer groups seem primary in shaping and maintaining "normative behavior". The closer the tie to tradition, religion and peer groups the less likely the respondent is to be the initiator of romantic or sexual behavior, either within an existing relationship or in starting a new relationship.

Although actual sexual desire declines with age, the major factor preventing women from continuing to be sexually active to some degree is lack of a partner. Almost forty years ago Lewin noted that when children were unable to obtain goal

objects such as toys which were within their field of vision yet out of reach, they soon acted as though the toys were no longer a part of their psychological field. Similarly, long and chronic sexual frustration in older women may result in the development of other sources of interest and satisfaction (Lewin, 1939). The saying "demography is destiny" is particularly applicable to older women for whom there are so few men. Women who believe that the group of men they want to be involved with are not interested in being involved with them may begin to define their situation as hopeless and eventually lose interest. While it is true that a short supply of men limits the field of eligibles considerably, there is another important reason for women being without mates . . . they choose to be alone. That this implies living without a sexual partner may be considered the price one has to pay for the advantages of living alone. These women are disinterested in sex because they see it existing primarily within the realm of marriage. Single women sixty-five years of age and older frequently see men as burdens that they are not willing to carry. They are more interested in self-fulfillment and independence than in having a mate, which to them means undertaking the responsibility of caring for someone else.

Participation in clubs and organizations does not necessarily increase the likelihood that a respondent will in-

teract with more men, since many clubs and organizations consist primarily of women or encourage activities which are segregated by sex. Limited interaction with men in club settings results from memberships varying by sex (see Argyle, 1959); Hausknecht, 1962; Payne and Whittington, 1976). Women belong to more religious and "do gooder" types of organizations than men. Organizations which restrict membership by sex reflect culturally defined conceptions of what is appropriate for men and what is appropriate for women, thus serving to reinforce sex-role stereotypes. For this reason we observe women belonging to organizations whose goal it is to help and serve others while men belong to civic and service organizations which are functional to their careers. Even though most of the older people studied are retired from their occupations, their sex segregated club and organizational memberships do not change. We find then, that women who attend the most meetings and activities interact to an ever increasing degree with other women. As women become older and gradually association focuses primarily on same sex groups, the distance and lack of contact with men results in a stereotypical view of men which is not positive. Misandrist attitudes are found more frequently in these women than in women who regularly associate with men. As a result, single, older women often decided that they were not interested in having men friends.

Because of the way they were raised and the way they view sex roles, older women of lower social standing are more likely to engage in "game like" activity with males, e.g., pretending to be helpless, naive, or dumb. If they are in a relationship, they are also more likely to make the man the focal point of interaction and go to great lengths to see that his ego is appropriately flattered. When women have been single all their lives or when they become single from divorce or widowhood, the attention focus is on them. If this is perceived as a positive state and if they view a relationship as being something that by its very nature is male centered, then they may seek to remain uninvolved.

Current life satisfaction is very high for most respondents while sexual desire is very low. It could be that for these respondents sexuality is not an issue of such importance that it has a major impact on or is a determining factor in overall life satisfaction or happiness.

It appears that most single women in this study showed a lack of interest in finding a partner. It is possible that women who were married for many years and then widowed do not like the idea of "starting all over again" with a new husband. Perhaps it is similar to the way a woman in her forties with college age children would feel about having another baby . . . she did it once and it was great but she does not want to begin

all over again. She is ready to focus her interest and attention in new directions. Besides, what would her grown children think? What would the neighbors say?

If an older woman believes it is unrealistic for women her age to expect to find someone to become involved with and/or marry and if she now sees a man as a financial, physical, or psychological liability rather than as an asset, she is undoubtedly going to show less interest than a person with a more positive mind set.

According to ordinal rankings made by respondents, sexual desire definitely decreases with age, as does health. Happiness, social life and income show more variations and do not evidence a consistent decline with age.

It is possible that these women, many of whom have lived a great deal of their lives as "second class citizens" and perhaps feel that their interests have always taken a back seat to the interests of men, are now experiencing feelings of resentment toward men in general. If this is true, it would suggest that it is improbable that women who feel an underlying hostility toward males would have an interest in getting involved with them.

Women believe they are better able to adjust to aging because they (women) are constantly experiencing modifications in the characteristics of each assigned role as they enter

different stages of the life cycle or they modify their definition of the role in response to external events. It is likely, as Kline (1975) contends, that the impact of socialization for women is the creation of impermanence in the form of role loss and repeated adjustment to change in the life situation - and that this socialization process facilitates adjustment of women to old age, including adjustment to decreased sexual activity or no sexual activity at all.

Grey Panthers not withstanding, older women are unlikely to unite as a group with older men because they do not feel they "are one". Sex differences obviate age similarities to the point that very little "consciousness of kind" exists between them.

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